

STAT
✓

1,000 ARE SAID TO DIE IN SOVIET ACCIDENT

Account of '79 Incident Says Blast
in Bacteriological Plant Freed
Cloud of Lethal Agent

A Russian-language newspaper published in France has printed a detailed account, purportedly received from the Soviet Union, of the 1979 bacteriological accident reported in the West earlier this year.

The account, which appeared July 3 in the Paris émigré newspaper *Russkaya Mysl*, which means Russian Thought, cannot be independently verified. It said that more than 1,000 people near the city of Sverdlovsk, in the Urals, died in April and May 1979 after an explosion in a military biological plant released a microorganism that the report called the "I-21 strain" into the air.

In March the State Department said that hundreds of people might have died in what was described as an outbreak of anthrax, a livestock disease that can be transmitted to humans. The outbreak was attributed to an accident at a biological weapons facility.

There was some concern in Washington that the Soviet Union had violated the terms of a convention banning the production of germ-warfare agents. But the State Department announcement of the incident was also seen as part of a pattern of disclosures designed to embarrass the Soviet Union after its military intervention in Afghanistan.

Soviet Cited Anthrax Outbreak

In response to American inquiries in Moscow, the Soviet Union said that an anthrax outbreak had occurred in the spring of 1979, but that it was from natural causes.

The Paris report indicates a familiarity with local sites in Sverdlovsk, and therefore may have been written by a resident of the city. The report says that the deaths were caused neither by food contamination nor anthrax, which is usually associated with intestinal disorders. Hospitalized victims of the accident were said to have suffered from an unspecified pulmonary problem, suggesting inhalation rather than ingestion of the agent, and no disease was reported among livestock in the area.

The 1,200-word account was disseminated in New York by Freedom House, a nonprofit organization that monitors civil liberties around the world. The following sequence of events emerges from the report:

Some time between April 4 and 6 last year, the I-21 bacteriological strain was released by an explosion at a biological facility designated as Military Compound 19. A sketched map accompanying the published account indicates that the installation was situated on the southern outskirts of Sverdlovsk in pine woods adjoining the Sverdlovsky State Farm, which supplies fresh produce for the city of 1.2 million people.

Wind Blowing Away From City

According to the Paris report, it was "only a miracle" that the fatalities were limited to about 1,000. The prevailing wind at the time was away from the city, blowing the cloud of infestation south-southeast into sparsely populated peat bogs between highways leading from Sverdlovsk to Polevskoi and Sysert. Moreover, a late cold snap sent temperatures below the freezing mark, apparently reducing the virulence of the lethal agent.

The early victims of the explosion were said to include about a dozen scientists and technicians bearing the military ranks of reserve officers while working in the biological facility, and an undetermined number of people, "possibly the entire work shift," in a nearby ceramics factory.

The only inhabited place identified as having suffered many victims was the village of Kashino, 18 miles to the southeast and apparently in the path of the airborne agent.

Deaths Continued Into May

According to the Paris report, there were several hundred fatalities in the first few days after the explosion, but deaths continued at a rate of 30 to 40 a day until about the middle of May.

In an effort to control the situation, the authorities vaccinated the entire population of Chkalov Borough, the southern industrial section of Sverdlovsk in which the explosion occurred, a total of several hundred thousand people. They were vaccinated twice with an unidentified serum, in mid-April and toward the end of the month. But this measure apparently proved ineffective and those who had been inoculated also died.

After the snow melted, city residents were commandeered into the streets for a spring clean-up in an apparent effort to eradicate any remaining infestation. Topsoil was also reported stripped from the swath of infestation to the southeast from the reported explosion. In Kashino, the village streets were covered with asphalt, an unusual luxury for a rural area in the Soviet Union, according to the Paris report.